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TRANSITIONS TO AND WITHIN ADULTHOOD

Title: Transitions to and within adulthood for young people with special educational needs

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Introduction

Transitions are associated with changes in various domains of life. It can thus be difficult to determine a clear line of development in the fluxes and flows of human growth and change. In accordance with the ambitions of modern life course theory (cf. Diwald and Mayer 2009), researchers are encouraged not only to study single transitions, but also to analyse interrelated trajectories from adolescence to adulthood. Such approach allows for investigating potential patterns of cumulative advantage and disadvantage.

Analyses of transitions frequently draw upon two complementary fields of knowledge: lifespan psychology and life course sociology, respectively. The former includes the proximal context (e.g. family and social relationships); the latter discusses more distal features (e.g. structural and cultural context) in addition to studying historical change over time.

The lifespan view of development recognises that the potential for development is constant throughout our lives and that ageing is not necessarily accompanied by decline and deterioration (Dacey and Travers 1994; Boyd and Bee 2009). Important changes occur at all stages in the lifespan and they can be similar in magnitude to those of early developmental periods (Boyd and Bee 2009).

The life course theory refers to a multidisciplinary paradigm with a focus on the connection between individual lives and the historical and socio-economic context in which these lives unfold. This approach offers the sociocultural construction of one's life stages with particular focus on cultural expression in response to social and political change (Cohen and Ainley 2000).

The combination of such proximal and distal contexts provides a set of space–time coordinates, which differentially shape the timing and sequences of transitions through which one's life course is constructed (Bynner 2008). Integration or cross-fertilisation of these two theoretical approaches can be of benefit in research on transitions to and within adulthood for young people with special educational needs (SEN) (Diwald and Mayer 2009; Elder and Giele 2009). Additional factors impacting on and shaping their transitions may include lack of preparation, information or support, few opportunities to develop the skills needed for adult roles, and disjointed services unable to meet their support needs (Stewart 2006). Some transitional challenges may relate to the main characteristics of certain disabilities, which can naturally vary in intensity and significance at different stages of life (Seltzer et al. 2003). Other challenges have a more systemic nature, i.e. family-related concerns (e.g. restriction in family life, need for constant parental supervision), educational choices (e.g. mainstream vs. specialised provision), and concerns about independence and future services (residential, vocational and leisure services) (Seltzer et al. 2003).

Existing research shows that in the last few decades, transitions to adulthood have gradually ceased to follow socially constructed normative timelines of life trajectories (Arnett 2014). This phase of the life course can, therefore, prove challenging for most adolescents, even for those without SEN and with access to

ample resources in their parental homes (cf. Osgood et al. 2005). This special issue focuses on research into additional challenges for vulnerable young people.

One area of focus is on dependence on social welfare systems amongst young adults with SEN. In their article, Skjong and Myklebust present narrative analysis of life course trajectories of seven young adult males over a period of 17 years – from their enrolment in secondary school with special needs teaching whilst in their teens to their participation in various social welfare programmes whilst in their mid-thirties. The authors use the life course approach as the theoretical framework for analysing the presented data.

Challenges associated with interpersonal relationships, both in virtual and real world, are also discussed. In their longitudinal study, Bele and Kvalsund followed vulnerable young people from secondary school as they made their transitions into early and late twenties, and then mid-thirties. The authors investigated participants' social network relationships in different phases of adult life, focusing mainly on factors explaining patterns of social adaptation.

This article is followed by reflections on difficulties with adaptive functioning in daily transitions for adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Rydzewska's article draws on evidence from 12 interviews with individuals on the autism spectrum age 16–43, and two focus groups with 8 family members of people affected by ASD. Particular emphasis is placed on impact of adaptive functioning difficulties on well-being and quality of life for adults with ASD.

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